

Coercive, Normative, and Mimetic Isomorphism Inquiries on the Crisis Communication by Hotels During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Corina Joseph¹, Ranee Atlas^{2*}, Tina Stephen Enggong³ and Audrey Nicholas Rateh⁴

^{1,3}Faculty of Accountancy, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Sarawak, Malaysia

²Faculty of Hotel and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Sarawak

⁴Hemisphere Corporations Sdn. Bhd., Sarawak Economic Development Corporations, Sarawak, Malaysia

¹corina@uitm.edu.my; ²ranee@uitm.edu.my; ³stenia@uitm.edu.my;

⁴audrey@sedctourism.com

*Corresponding Author

Received: 28 June 2022

Accepted: 10 September 2022

Published: 30 September 2022

ABSTRACT

Crisis communication is essential during the pandemic. This paper aims to explain factors influencing crisis communication in three Sarawak-based hotels using the isomorphism tenet. A multiple case study approach was applied. A semi-structured interview with the hotel personnel was conducted in May 2022. It was found that the coercive isomorphism arises from the invitation by the state government for the two hotels to participate as the quarantine centers. In terms of mimetic isomorphism, hotels imitated the best practices of their peers in the same organizational field. Finally, normative isomorphism evidence was proven by professional networking via regular sharing of crisis information with staff and close relationships



This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

with parties that are responsible for addressing the pandemic issues, such as police, medical teams, hotel associations, hotel associates, and others. This research contributes to the crisis communication literature in the tourism industry particularly in an emerging economy in terms of promoting crisis disclosure on the website.

Keywords: *Crisis communication; isomorphism; website; tourism*

INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry is the world's largest and most diverse industry. Many nations rely on this dynamic industry as a primary source for generating revenues, employment, private sector growth, and infrastructure development. According to UNWTO (United Nations World Tourism Organization), international tourism revenue amounted to 1.48 trillion U.S. dollars in 2019 which is 9% of the world's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and one of the highest compared with other industries and provided one out of eleven direct or indirect job opportunities to the world's population. The closure of borders and the implementation of the Movement Control Order since 18th March 2020 to curb further outbreaks of COVID-19 in the country have restricted the movement of travelers. According to Tourism Malaysia, in the year 2020 Malaysia received 4,332,722 international tourists a decrease of 83.4% compared to the same period of time in 2019. In terms of total expenditure, Malaysia recorded RM12.69 billion, a decrease of 85.3%. Sarawak recorded 1,199,872 tourist arrivals in 2020, a decrease of 74.27% compared to 2019. In terms of tourist receipt, Sarawak recorded MYR 2.88 billion, a reduction of 75.11% from previous years. In 2021 the state only received 235,245 visitors (-80.39%) and MYR 536.17 million (-81.37%) in terms of tourist receipts.

At the end of 2019, the world was hit by the latest COVID-19 pandemic. Daga et al. (2019) state that the initial reporting of COVID-19 happened in Hubei Province, Wuhan City, China in November 2019 and spread throughout the world by March 2020. Darsono et al (2020) defined the COVID-19 pandemic as one of the world's most significant catastrophes that happened after World War II.

The decisions on movement control orders (MCO), country lockdown, and international travel restrictions mainly affected the tourism industry more than any other industry in the world. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) further elaborates that in the year 2020 international tourist arrivals worldwide have declined by 73% compared with the year 2019. Asia and the Pacific region have faced an 84% decline, in Africa 68%, America 68%, Europe 70%, and in the Middle East 74% respectively. This figure hit its lowest in April at 97% and May at 96%. In 2021, worldwide international tourist arrivals increased by 2 percent to 71% as compared to 2019 but Asia and the Pacific region are still at -94% and show no sign of recovery.

Due to the rapid increase of the pandemic, most countries announced a lockdown, and travelling was also restricted. The tourism industry has suffered a significant negative impact directly from the economy's downfall (Baldwin, 2020). After one year, the COVID-19 pandemic is still ongoing. It indirectly drives a fall in the tourism industry of Malaysia (Karim, Haque, Anis & Ulfy, 2020). The closure of airlines, hotels, entertainment spots, tourism spots, homestays, and transport, a large drop in tourists due to which hotels cannot survive in the market and the workers and labour are also suffering, leading to an increase in unemployment rates not only in Malaysia but all over the world because most companies, organizations, and corporations are downsizing and firing the employees and also sending them on unpaid leave for an unknown period. Many jobs were also dropped because of the region's falling revenues (Foo, 2020). Due to this pandemic, Malaysia's government imposed MCO on the 18th of March 2020 to curb the panic situation for a long time, resulting in a massive impact on Malaysia's economy.

In 2020, the Malaysian government faced a downfall of almost RM 3.37 billion (Karim et al., 2020). All the tour packages for 2020 were terminated by the government, which left the hotels, tourism, and airlines with a considerable impact. The GDP was affected by almost 0.8 to 1.2%, approximately RM 10.8 billion to RM 17.3 billion (Karim et al., 2020). The Ministry of Tourism terminated the campaign of Visiting Malaysia 2020, which has a significant impact on the government's target, which was to achieve success in the arrival of almost 30 million tourists. The tourists who were already present in Malaysia but under MCO were allowed only to order food from online food ordering services while in the room. It was the duty

of room service to deliver that food to the tourists in the room. The Malaysian government took tremendous measures to cope with the panic situation of the pandemic. They also provided vouchers of US \$22 per head after the government's announcement to support the US \$113 million (Foo, 2020). The impact of COVID-19 on the tourism industry is so devastating that it caused a profound and severe downfall in the sector.

As tours were cancelled, that created a massive impact on the hotel occupancy rate as all the tourists cancelled their bookings. From the period of January to March 2020 before the lockdown period, tourists withdrew 170,084 room bookings, resulting in a significant reduction in revenue of RM 68,190,364 because of the increased cases of COVID-19 (Karim et al., 2020). Table 1 shows hotel room cancellations by state in 2020.

Table 1
Hotel room cancellations in Malaysia by State in the year 2020

State	Room cancellations	Losses (in RM)
Kuala Lumpur	55,050	23,012,301
Sabah	32,392	11,550,605
Pulau Pinang	17,753	8,908,000
Selangor	22,929	7,212,048
Negeri Sembilan	13,534	6,690,500
Johor	18,455	5,636,470
Kedah	3299	3,291,500
Perak	2403	1,022,289
Melaka	4074	690,499
Pahang	180	144,628
Sarawak	76	22,525
Total	170,085	68,190,364

Source: Malaysia Association of Hotels (2021)

The total revenue loss of all states is about RM 68,190,364, resulting from the hotel room cancellation of about 170,085 hotel rooms (MAH, 2021). The total loss leads to the issue of how hotels handle this crisis, which hurts business sustainability and survival. Success and survival mostly depend on their ability to adapt to their surroundings. The challenge for organisations in these circumstances is to adequately manage the crisis, get business back on track, and, most importantly, communicate all changes, the reasons for them, and how the crisis is being handled to all stakeholders so that long-term consequences are as positive as possible (Fuchs, 2021). Effective crisis communication is essential to keep stakeholders informed, protected, and prepared during a disaster. During a crisis, well-prepared and

developed crisis communication methods can communicate with one another quickly and efficiently, allowing firms to protect employees and customers while maintaining company continuity (Kwok, Lee & Han, 2021). Hence, it is important to explore how hotels communicate crisis information relating to COVID-19 using platforms, such as websites. In addition, it is put forward that there are potential explanatory factors that could describe the crisis communication by hotels on their websites. The objective of this paper is to explain factors influencing crisis communication in three Sarawak-based hotels using the isomorphism tenet. While crisis management is a well-studied profession in many domains, crisis communication is still considered a new area of interest (Fuchs, 2021). For this reason, this paper may contribute to the literature on crisis communication on websites during the pandemic using the isomorphism tenet in an emerging economy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Crisis Communication

Today, businesses are constantly changing and adapting to new challenges. The organizational environment is constantly changing, which makes organizations vulnerable to many threats. The ideal situation for an organization would be no disruptions or crises. However, few organizations can avoid all unexpected crises. In comparison to earlier epidemic outbreaks (e.g., SARS, H1N1, Ebola) and the financial crisis of 2008, the COVID-19 outbreak has resulted in a global catastrophe in which the hotel industry has suffered like never before (Del Chiappa, Bregoli & Fotiadis, 2021).

According to Civelek, Emberci, and Eralp (2016), crises are unanticipated events that have the potential to have negative consequences. Being prepared for crises is difficult for businesses since they occur unexpectedly, and crises that arise unexpectedly may result in the erosion of organisational structure as well as bad results in personnel, goods, services, financial status, and organisational reputation. Because a crisis is an unanticipated and unwelcome event, it necessitates communicating with stakeholders – a practice known as crisis communication (Fall & Massey, 2008).

The collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis can be defined broadly as crisis communication (Coombs, 2010). Coombs (1999), as cited in Holmes (2011), offers another definition that describes crisis communications as integrated and crucial aspects of a four-part total crisis management approach, which includes prevention, preparation, performance, and learning. In contrast, according to Gray (2003), as cited in Holmes (2011), crisis communications are primarily about managing the crisis' result, impact, and public perception.

Crisis communication, according to Fall and Massey (2006), is a three-stage model:

1. *Crisis preparation* – If organisations are to survive a crisis, they must build reservoirs of goodwill among internal and external stakeholders as well as maintain effective reputations with stakeholders.
2. *Crisis response* – In this step of the model, key stakeholders are identified, and a dialogue with them is established.
3. *Crisis recovery* – The group concentrates its efforts on reputation management and restoring normalcy to the organisation.

There are several empirical studies on crisis communication done by scholars on non-COVID crises such as terrorism or bomb threats (Hornmoen, 2018), floods (Goldgruber, Sackl-Sharif, Ausserhofer, and Gutounig, 2018) tsunamis (Jeyasekara, 2021, Rafliana, Jalayer, Cerase, Cugliari, Baiguera, Salmanidou, & Hancilar, 2022) September 11 (Argenti, 2003) and earthquakes (Splendiani & Capriello, 2022, Arora, 2022). Hornmoen (2018) stated that the terrorist-induced crisis in 2011 was a wake-up call for communicators in the police and the health sector. Twitter and Short Messaging System (SMS) were used to disseminate information via SMS, Twitter, as interactives and dialogue. Goldgruber et. al (2018) stated that social media platforms, such as Facebook, usage of hashtag on Twitters can become spaces for the public to access and share information. Jeyasekara (2021) outlined the gaps in existing early warning and evacuation procedures related to tsunamis and other coastal hazards, with a special focus on the use of social media for disaster communication based on age groups. The role of Twitter in crisis communication is also studied by Splendiani and Capriello (2022) by analysing all the earthquake-related messages from local public authorities in four Italian regions (Abruzzo,

Lazio, Marche and Umbria). A study by Argenti (2003) on the September 11 tragedy revealed that internal crisis-communications strategies are not only important between businesses and customers but also between businesses and employees. Therefore, crisis communication should be rapidly implemented and become a key responsibility of top management.

Why Crisis Communication Strategies are Important?

Crisis communication refers to the dissemination of information by an organization to address a crisis that impacts customers and/or the organization's reputation. The strategy is used to deal with financial, personnel, organizational, technological, and natural crises that could affect business organizations in various ways. As the world is facing the COVID-19 pandemic, effective communication is the key to maintaining trust, and brand integrity and continuing to create value for stakeholders. (Lanz, Ferari & Mody, 2020). According to their study, six checklists include the overall communications strategy for an operational hospitality asset, internal communications, media communications, external touchpoints, proactive sales and marketing communications, and leadership communications.

Crisis management usually addresses one or more of the event's three areas or stages: (a) pre-crisis preparedness, (b) proposals for handling midst crises, and (c) post-crisis strategies to restore the corporate image (Omillion-Hodges & McClain, 2016). Then, from the external and internal perspectives, crisis management literature often involves the shaping of stakeholder perceptions during the three stages of a crisis, in addition to the leadership efforts of managing organizational dynamics and learning (Bundy et al., 2017). Therefore, organizations are strongly recommended to choose the type of crisis communication strategy based on the level of responsibility that the public attributes to the organization (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), an agency responsible for the promotion of responsible, sustainable, and universally accessible tourism has taken an initiative to publish a *COVID-19 dashboard* on country measures to support travel and tourism as a policy tracker with up-to-date policy responses by countries and international institutions to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 crisis in the travel and tourism sector, restart tourism and accelerate recovery.

Today, social media has become a critical component of people's lives (Utz et al., 2013). Various hospitality and tourism businesses have also used social media as an essential tool for communications, promotions, marketing, brand management, service recovery, research, and other managerial implications (Mehraliyev et al., 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, people work remotely at home, and classes are taught online. Social media's role in crisis communication can become even more critical for hospitality and tourism organizations. The messages that receive more reactions and comments and get more shares from internet users can create a more significant electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) effect (Kwok et al., 2019; Soboleva et al., 2017).

A good communication plan indicates the organization's care about employees and customers (Baravia, 2018). During crises and emergencies, timely and relevant information is critical and should be an integral part of an effective communications plan. A crisis communication strategy is also important to ensure accurate information is provided during an emergency to minimize problems caused by misleading communications. The plan should include key contacts, templates, and detailed procedures on how and when to share information and with whom.

Bermudez and Izquierdo (2020) reiterated that the primary essence of communication is to share transparency, truthfulness, and timeliness. The main purposes are to build and reinforce credibility, which is fundamental to gaining public trust, and for authenticity and accuracy. Therefore, effective crisis communications involve media management, incident management, and the management team itself.

Strategies in Communicating the Crisis Information on Websites

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 to be a worldwide pandemic. This pandemic has taken everyone by surprise because it happened so swiftly and has never happened before in modern history. To slow the spread of the virus, all afflicted countries have implemented limitations on population mobility. Various economic activities have been terminated or have been severely curtailed. Production, transportation, and commerce activities have all been adversely impacted by the pandemic. The tourist industry has also been hit hard by the

pandemic, with individuals all around the world deferring their plans to travel to focus on their own and their family's health (Susilo & Prayudi, 2021).

The hotels shared five types of COVID-19 (Prevention, Reminding, Ingratiation, Victimage, and Updates) and non-COVID-19 messages on social media, according to a study conducted by Kwok, Lee, and Han (2021) that assessed internet users' attention to hospitality companies' COVID-19 messages of eight (8) of the world's largest hotel chains (Marriott, Hilton, IHG, Wyndham, Choice Hotels, Best Western, Hyatt, and Radisson). Their study analysed 657 Facebook and 754 Twitter messages from the eight hotels between January and mid-June 2020; and the findings revealed that COVID-19 messages garnered more replies, comments, and shares/retweets on Facebook and Twitter than non-COVID-19 messages. Prevention, reminders, gratitude, updates, and messages containing photographs and videos, on the other hand, garnered greater attention.

Fuchs (2021) conducted a study on the International Hotels Groups' (IHG) crisis communication strategy, which was implemented during the COVID-19 crisis. The hotels implemented a new corporate social responsibility strategy called "Journey to Tomorrow" in February 2021, almost a year after the COVID-19 crisis began. The strategy is based on previously established and internalized brand values, visions, and missions, such as respect for the organization's culture, hotels, and communities, and a strong understanding of all associated stakeholder groups' expectations and demands. These have been enhanced by a greater emphasis on people, the environment, and communities, as well as qualitative research-based insights into stakeholder values and how they have changed as a result of the COVID-19 issue. The crisis itself, as well as the pandemic that hit the hospitality industry, became a major focus of the new CSR strategy, as did the need and desire to convey crisis-related modifications and adjustments to people who manage, support, and shape IHG's public perception and reputation. The most essential avenues of communication for IHG with its stakeholders are its CSR reports and corporate website.

In a study conducted by Zavisic, Zavisic, and Bernardic (2022) to determine the manner and level of use of social networks as a crisis communication platform for small and family hotels in the Republic of Croatia, it was discovered that social networks are the most preferred

communication channel (59.4%), followed by e-mail/newsletters, then their websites, and finally web portals as a method of informing clients and potential clients in case of crisis.

Crisis Communication in the Tourism Industry

During the pandemic, because all tourist attractions were closed to the public, the number of tourists dropped dramatically. As a result, all stakeholders in the tourism industry, including hotels, are impacted. Susilo and Prayudi (2021) conducted a study at three five-star hotels in Yogyakarta to determine the measures taken by the hotels in crisis communication and discovered two types of crisis communication: isolated and egalitarian. Isolation occurs when a lack of communication leads to proletarian solidarity. Those hotels that have isolated crisis communication are hurting themselves, and the hotel loses the best human resources when they resign. Meanwhile, a hotel with an egalitarian crisis communication model will have strong crisis communication, be able to exhibit empathy, and be able to establish staff solidarity in times of disaster. As a result, hotels with equitable crisis communication are more likely to survive.

Organizations can post their latest verbal, audio, and visual content, including films and live streams, on social media, which is a significant tool for crisis communications (Camilleri, 2021). Hence, corporate communications teams should include digital and social media as part of their crisis and risk management strategies. Subscribers can use social media to spread material virally and/or participate in real-time online interactions with individuals and organizations.

Theoretical Framework

One of the widely-used theories to comprehend a few organizational and individual practices is the institutional theory (see, for example, Joseph, Nichol, and Jonathan, 2019). DiMaggio and Powell (1983, p.149) explained the course of action in which organizations are inclined to carry out similar structures and practices as 'isomorphism. Isomorphism is a condition that forces a unit to be compatible with another unit in the populace that is handling the same state of affairs (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), also described as a “homogenization of organizations”.

There are several reasons for isomorphism in organizations. Institutional isomorphism upholds the achievement and continued existence of the organization (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Meyer and Rowan (1977, p.349) put forward that "by incorporating externally legitimated formal structure, this will increase the commitment of internal participants and external constituents of the organizations". By considering the social assessment criteria, society may perceive success continuously in the organization. In this paper, the crisis communication in responding to COVID-19 by hotels on their websites is acknowledged as the legitimated formal structure to become isomorphic in the same organizational field.

Coercive isomorphism is the most quoted institutional pressure. According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983, p.149), the forces can be "exercised by other organizations on which an organization may be dependent, as well as cultural expectations in which the organizations operate". In this paper, the coercive pressures come from the regulatory authorities monitoring and regulating the COVID-19 situation at the county and state level, for example, the Ministry of Health (MOH) and the State Disaster Management Centre (SDMC).

The second type of institutional form is mimetic isomorphism. Mimetic isomorphism suggests the 'copying' of best practices of "those organizations perceived to be legitimate and successful" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p.150). The mocking behaviour is more likely to occur when organizations struggle to implement certain best practices that lead to copying behaviour among members in the same organizational field. Thus, this paper will explore whether there is a tendency for all hotels under study to imitate the best practice successfully implemented by other hotels within or outside the country.

The normative isomorphism is the final isomorphism. This pressure normally comes from professionals and occupational groups (Joseph et al., 2019). This is usually the sharing of norms, beliefs, and culture involving organizational practices throughout the organization. This can be accomplished using official and unofficial communication, such as internal goals, meetings, and websites.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research deployed an explanatory case study approach using semi-structured interviews (Genovese et al., 2014) to “understand complex social phenomena” (Yin, 2003, p. 2). The unit of analysis included the three Sarawak hotels based under the subsidiary company (HC Sdn. Bhd.) of a state-owned statutory body based in Sarawak. The three hotels were identified as Hotel GM, Hotel RM, and Hotel DB. Referring to Creswell (2007, p. 76), “...there is no set number of cases ... the researcher chooses no more than four or five cases.” The justification for choosing these three hotels is based on initial observation of the websites of hotels based in Kuching, Sarawak – it is found that there is disclosure relating to COVID-19 information on the three hotels’ websites. The data collection method involved a focus group online interview discussion with officers directly involved in the crisis communication on 24 May 2022. During the data analysis stage, some of the interview findings were compared with information disclosed on the hotels’ websites. Permission to conduct interviews was obtained from the Group Human Resource and Administration Manager, who consequently selected the interview participants. Table 2 shows the respondents’ profile for this study.

Table 2
Respondent’s profile

	Position	Hotel/organization	Years of Working Experience
1	Group Human Resource & Administration Manager	State-owned statutory body	11
2	Human Resource Executive	GM	6
3	Human Resource Executive	RM	7
4	(Operation Manager	DB	21
5	Human Resource Executive	DB	10

The focus group discussion using Google Meet was recorded for analysis with the interviewees’ permission. The use of Google Meet to conduct the interview has become quite common for qualitative studies since the COVID-19 crisis (see Aung et. al., 2021). Video conferencing, such as using Google Meet could offer researchers and project participants an appropriate and secure choice for in-person qualitative research, notwithstanding several important limitations and considerations. The flexibility of video conferencing could possibly permit scholars to engage

members by reducing transportation and transit time barriers and agreeing to increased flexibility to accommodate the participants' schedules (Santhosh et. al., 2021). The interview lasted for almost two hours. Since all the three sites are from HC SB, which consists of five informants, the respondents seem to agree with each other's responses, which indicates the point of saturation for this study. This is in line with a qualitative study (see Abdul Majid et al., 2018, p.71) that stated the interviews ceased when there was no new data emerging during the data collection. This is to allow time for discussions and probing into any further issues raised by the subjects. The interview questions asked were guided by the research objective- to explain factors influencing crisis communication in three Sarawak-based hotels using the isomorphism tenet. The interview questions (see the Appendix) were developed from the research roadmap and theory as discussed in this paper. The interview findings were transcribed 'word-by-word' verbatim by the researchers to ensure transcription accuracy and to minimize possible interviewer error or bias. To ensure the validity of the findings, the transcription is given to the Group Manager for checking.

The three procedures to analyse the qualitative data are as follows (Miles and Huberman, 1994):

1. Data reduction: this included the reduction and organization of interview transcriptions conducted in the three hotels using coding, summary, and removal of inappropriate information.
2. Data display: this involved concluding the big data, which was performed continuously.
3. Conclusion drawing/verification: this comprised the analysis of data for coming up with the conclusion in this study. The confirmation was conducted concerning the interview notes or further data collection.

Empirical Cases

HC Sdn. Bhd. is a wholly-owned subsidiary of a state-owned statutory body. The company manages hotels, resorts, the Sarawak Cultural Village, and the Sarawak Golf Club. The hotels under the case study are Hotel GM, Hotel RM, and Hotel DB. Table 3 presents the demographic information of the three hotels under study as of July 2022 as provided by the Group Human Resource and Administration Manager.

Table 3
Demographic profile of the three hotels

Hotel	Number of rooms	Number of guests	Number of staff
GM	280	80,899	188
DB	230	33,656	131
RM	514	71,690	192

These three hotels are widely recognized due to their excellent services as shown in Table 4:

Table 4
List of awards by the three hotels

	Hotel	Awards
1	GM	Best Hotel 2020 (KAYAK Traveller Favourite), Best Luxury Hotel 2020 (KAYAK Traveller Favourite), Rating 8.4 by Hotels.Com, Travel & Hospitality Nominee 2021
2	RM	Best Hotel 2020 (KAYAK Traveller Favourite), Best Luxury Hotel 2020 (KAYAK Traveller Favourite), Rating 8.2 by Hotels.Com, Travel & Hospitality Nominee 2021
3	DB	Traveloka Travel Award 2019

Source: Hotel's websites

FINDINGS

The interview started with a question that explored an understanding of the definition of crisis communication in the context of the hotel industry, especially during and after the post-COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Group Human Resource and Administration Manager, crisis communication is used to mitigate risk, ensure effective communication, and ensure business continuity. The interviewees believed that the use of email, mobile phones, and social media is crucial during a crisis to ensure communication is done correctly among employees, guests, and other stakeholders. It is also used to share norms and values, avoid panic, and simplify communication. Businesses may share various types of information or messages with their stakeholders on social media. Social media's role in crisis communication can become even more critical for hospitality and tourism organizations (Mehraliyev et al., 2020) for communications, promotions, marketing, brand management, service recovery, research, and other managerial implications. Web portals are

widely used as a method of informing clients and potential clients in case of a crisis (Zavisic et. al., 2022). The three forms of institutional isomorphism as described by DiMaggio and Powell (1991) exist to explain factors influencing crisis communication in three Sarawak-based hotels.

Coercive

During the pandemic, the state government selected several hotels to be the quarantine center. Designating hotels as quarantine centres were part of the state government's efforts to help the hotel industry which is badly hit by the pandemic. An invitation to respond to the government's plan is an example of coercive pressure (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). As well, this effort is fully supported by the Malaysian Association of Hotels (MAH) Sarawak (Edward, 2020). In this regard, hotels are required to comply with requirements by the Ministry of Health, such as sanitation. In line with the coercive isomorphism, hotels are expected to comply with the state government as the funder for the quarantine centers. As reported by Chua (2021) in the Borneo Post, the compliance with a funding requirement for quarantine centers is highlighted:

Abdul Karim, who is a member of the State Disaster Management Committee (SDMC), said the Sarawak government had since September, last year paid about RM30 million every two months to the hotel operators for their hotels to serve as quarantine centers.

In this study, hotel GM and hotel RM have been selected as the participants as the quarantine centers. Both hotels are expected to comply with formal pressures exerted by the Ministry of Health, the State Disaster Management Committee, the Royal Police Malaysia, and others.

Websites are used as a tool to communicate COVID-19, especially to external stakeholders, especially guests and customers. This is in line with Lanz et. al. (2020) that maintain that effective communication is the key to maintaining trust, brand integrity and continuing to create value for stakeholders as the world is facing the COVID-19 pandemic. Past studies indicate that stakeholders are one of the sources of coercive pressure (Midin, Joseph & Mohamed, 2017). According to the Group Human Resource and Administration Manager, websites could show:

- The readiness of customers, especially during post-COVID-19
- Do and don'ts videos before any functions including the safety briefing
- Changes in product and services announcement
- Safety measures that need to be undertaken

Normative

Normative isomorphism is perceived as the consequential outcome when the customs and beliefs of people, professional organizations, and academic qualifications affect organizational practices. It is cited by Joseph et. al. (2019) that normative isomorphism is not acquired by force or obligation, but is accomplished through the power of customs and beliefs. Therefore, organizations implement certain practices for the reason that they will be accepted along with the societal and professional code of conduct. This suggests that communicating crisis information on the website during the pandemic becomes a shared norm of the organization's members and gains acceptance within the three cases (Joseph & Taplin, 2012).

Similarly, knowledge sharing via email, mobile phones, and social media among employees, guests, and other stakeholders to homogenize the standard operating practice (SOP) is evidence of normative isomorphism. Evidence of normative isomorphism-promoting the SOP to the staff regularly is quoted below:

Staff follows SOP and is reminded regularly (Human Resource Executive, Hotel GM)

WhatsApp is a very useful platform to communicate the latest information relating to COVID-19. The SDMC is well-versed and plays an important role in informing the public of official news, updates, and SOPs from the state government. Hotels in Sarawak are directly receiving directives from the SDMC and will be communicating them to internal and external stakeholders. A crisis communication strategy is also important to ensure accurate information is provided during an emergency to minimize problems caused by misleading communications (Bararia, 2018). Since this pandemic is unprecedented, the clear directive from the SDMC helps all hoteliers in managing and handling issues. This is the way to promote homogenization of practice—complying with SOPs, and providing evidence

of normative isomorphism. According to the Group Human Resource and Administration Manager,

SDMC WhatsApp group is formed, and all hotels are well-informed.

Another evidence of normative isomorphism that exists in the crisis communication practices for all three hotels is the support from the Malaysian Association of Hotels (MAH), registered with the Registrar of Societies of Malaysia, which was established in 1974 and is officially recognized as the National Hotel Association. During the pandemic, MAH is closely communicating matters of COVID-19 to all its members. This would directly promote similar values, norms, and practices among members of the same organizational field. This is in line with Joseph et. al. (2019) that stated normative isomorphism is normally coming from professionals and occupational groups. Furthermore, during the pandemic, at Hotel DB, the staff are working closely and showing concern for each other.

Another interesting finding that emerges from the interview findings is how the nearby Golf Club also plays an important role in shaping norms and values relating to crisis management. According to the Operation Manager of Hotel DB. This is because the golf club is under the management of HC Sdn Bhd.

The support from top management, i.e., the state-owned statutory body is vital in homogenizing crisis communication practices. Based on the interview findings, it is put forward that awareness and the latest information need to be shared regularly. The Human Resource is seen as the forefront and 'one-stop center' for handling these COVID-19 SOPs in the hotels. The human resource team has tried its best to foresee issues that would come along the way during the pandemic. It appears that all the three hotels under study adopt an egalitarian type of crisis communication, i.e., have strong crisis communication; can exhibit empathy, and can establish staff solidarity in times of disaster. As a result, hotels with equitable crisis communication are more likely to survive (Susilo & Prayudi, 2021).

Furthermore, the crisis communication process described in this interview follows Fall and Massey's (2006) three-stage model: 1) Crisis preparation –maintain effective reputations with stakeholders; 2).Crisis

response – identified and established a dialogue with stakeholders, and 3) Crisis recovery – The group focuses on reputation management and returning the organisation to normalcy.

Mimetic

Ambiguity is the major cause of mimetic isomorphism. By way of copying, organizations could their peers which they felt to be acceptable (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Copying behavior helps in enhancing the organization's learning condition. The website is used as an important learning tool to handle the crisis of COVID-19. In this context, the SDMC website has become a reliable source for all organizations to refer to since the pandemic is unprecedented. This situation explains the mimetic isomorphism faced by many organizations during the pandemic.

The other hotels' websites in other states in Malaysia are referred to in terms of communicating crisis information. As mentioned by the Operation Manager of Hotel DB:

Yes. We refer to the same info on other hotel's websites – 4 or 5-star hotels especially Penang and Langkawi

Apart from that, hotels also refer to online websites, for example, Trip Advisor, Traveloka, and Agoda, to enhance their learning on information relating to handling COVID-19 issues. Also, hotels refer to information disclosed by the Malaysian Association of Hotels (MAH)'s websites as guidance to disclose information on their websites.

Another interesting interview finding is that there's an urge from the top management of the state-owned statutory body for all hotels to continuously update information on websites, such as new announcements relating to the SOPs. In this way, the learning process would be improved and healthy competition among all hotels in the state-owned statutory body would be encouraged.

CONCLUSION

This paper aims to explain factors influencing crisis communication in three Sarawak-based hotels using the isomorphism tenet. The case findings reveal that there are some elements of coercive, normative, and mimetic isomorphism that explain factors influencing crisis communication in three Sarawak-based hotels using the isomorphism tenet. The coercive isomorphism arises from the selection of Hotel RM and Hotel GM as the quarantine centers by the state government, an indication of legitimacy to be socially acceptable – hotels are trying to fulfil the expectations, particularly during COVID-19. The external stakeholders are regarded as sources of coercive isomorphism (especially guests and customers) in the paper.

From this mimetic isomorphism, hotels imitated the best practices of their peers in other states, Trip Advisor, and the Malaysian Association of Hotels (MAH)'s website. Finally, professional networking was used to demonstrate normative isomorphism evidence, such as via regular sharing of crisis information with staff and close relationships with parties responsible for addressing pandemic issues, such as police, medical teams, hotel associations, hotel associates, and others.

Based on findings from the three Sarawak-based hotels, there are a few recommendations that should be adopted by hotels affected by COVID-19. Management should be proactive and have a clear crisis response plan. The hotel's top management must be accessible to the staff, and communicate clearly to customers. During the pandemic, the guests at the hotel may be nervous, anxious, and unsure about the crisis. Hence, the staff must be empowered to answer all questions and build trust. The hotels need to keep their communication channels wide, consistent, and always responsive. They must utilise all communication tools and avenues such as telephone, email, website, social media, welcome letters, and display boards to reach their guests. Despite a deep cost-cutting strategy during a time of crisis, consistency is critical. To offer unique experiences and enhance customer loyalty at a reduced cost, it is suggested that hotels need to embark on creative marketing programs such as smart partnerships and networking with suppliers such as transportation companies.

This study has an inherent limitation as it only focused on three hotels in Sarawak. Hence, the findings could not be generalized to all Malaysian hotels. In addition, various hotels have different styles of conducting business.

The study adds to future studies in several ways. Researchers can use surveys for the data collection of the same topics and interests. Case studies of hotels outside Sarawak may potentially describe the isomorphic influence on crisis communication by hotels during the pandemic. In addition, future research could explore how the hotels handled the types of problems via crisis communication and suggest solutions to the problems. This paper is likely to provide a theoretical and practical contribution, as the isomorphism tenet theory has been deployed successfully to explain the crisis communication by three hotels under the state-owned statutory body in Sarawak. Some of the hotel managers were reportedly unprepared for a health epidemic, according to research, and as a result, they responded to the issue by using certain crisis management strategies. By educating them about crisis management communication strategies, the paper has practical implications for the tourism and hotel industries. In order to lessen the economic effects of crises and to be better prepared in the event that a new pandemic occurs, it aids hotels in establishing and determining crisis communication strategies. Recommendations from this paper encourage hotels to integrate sharp and organised crisis communication strategies into their business strategy, enabling a better knowledge of their current crisis communication strategies. Additionally, it will help hotels comprehend their current crisis management capabilities and strategies, as well as the constraints, prospective threats, and vulnerabilities that put the business at risk.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF AUTHORS

The authors confirm their equal contribution to each part of this work. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of this work.

FUNDING

This work received no specific grant from any funding agency.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The researchers would like to thank the Human Resource team of Hemisphere Corporations Sdn. Bhd. and staff who were involved directly and indirectly in completing this study. We also appreciate all the experiences being shared by all participants while participating in this study. This study was not funded by any agency.

REFERENCES

- Abdul Majid, M. A., Othman, M., Mohamad, S. F., & Lim, S. A. H. (2018). Achieving data saturation: Evidence from a qualitative study of job satisfaction. *Social and Management Research Journal*, 15(2), 65-78.
- Argenti, P. (2003). Crisis communication: Lessons from 9/11, *Harvard Business Review*, 80(12),103-109.
- Arora, S. (2022). Post-disaster communities on social media: Citizen participation in crisis communication after the Nepal earthquake, 2015. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 50(1), 1-18.
- Aung, K. T., Razak, R. A., & Nazry, N. N. M. (2021). Establishing validity and reliability of semi-structured interview questionnaire in developing risk communication module: A pilot study. *Edunesia: Jurnal Ilmiah Pendidikan*, 2(3), 600-606.
- Bararia, R. (2018). Significance of crisis communication: Internal and external. *Reputation Today*, 19. Retrieved on 16 June, 2022 from: <https://reputationtoday.in/significance-of-crisis-communications-internal-and-external/>.

- Bermudez, H., & Izquierdo, A. (July-August 2020). Trust and transparency in times of crisis. *PRSA*. <https://www.prsa.org/article/trust-and-transparency-in-times-of-crisis>
- Bundy, J., Pfarrer, M. D., Short, C. E., & Coombs, W. T. (2017). Crises and crisis management: Integration, interpretation, and research development. *Journal of Management*, 43(6), 1661–1692.
- Camilleri, M. A. (2021). Strategic dialogic communication through digital media during COVID-19 crisis. *Emerald Publishing Limited 1*, 1-18.
- Chua, S. (2021). Sarawak to pay RM15 mln monthly to operators of hotels used as quarantine centres – Abdul Karim, Retrieved 6 June 2022 from: <https://www.theborneopost.com/2021/03/02/sarawak-to-pay-rm15-mln-monthly-to-operators-of-hotels-used-as-quarantine-centres-abdul-karim/>
- Civelek, M. E., Çemberci, M., & Eralp, N. E. (2016). The role of social media in crisis communication and crisis management. *International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science*, 5(3), 111-120.
- Coombs, W. T. (2010). Parameters for crisis communication. *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, 17-53.
- Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (2002). Helping crisis managers protect reputational assets: Initial tests of the situational crisis communication theory. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 16(2), 165–186.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Sage Publication, Inc., Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Daga, M. K., Kumar, N., Aarthi, J., Mawari, G., Garg, S., & Rohatgi, I. (2019). From SARS-CoV to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)-A Brief Review. *Journal of Advanced Research in Medicine* (E-ISSN: 2349-7181 & P-ISSN: 2394-7047), 6(4), 1–9.
- Darsono, D., Rohmana, J. A., & Busro, B. (2020). Against COVID-19 pandemic: Bibliometric assessment of world scholars' international publications related to COVID-19. *Jurnal Komunikasi Ikatan Sarjana Komunikasi Indonesia*, 5(1), 75-89.
- Del Chiappa, G., Bregoli, I., & Fotiadis, A. K. (2021). The impact of COVID-19 on Italian accommodation: A supply-perspective. *Journal of Tourism, Heritage and Services Marketing* (JTHSM), 7(1), 13-22.
- DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review*, 48(2), 147–160.

- Edward, C. (2020). Seven hotels in Kuching offer to be Covid-19 quarantine centres, Retrieved 12 May 2022, from: <https://www.theborneopost.com/2020/04/03/seven-hotels-in-kuching-offer-to-be-covid-19-quarantine-centres/>
- Fall, L. T., & Massey, J. E. (2006). The significance of crisis communication in the aftermath of 9/11: A national investigation of how tourism managers have re-tooled their promotional campaigns. *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, 19(2-3), 77-90.
- Foo, L. P., Chin, M. Y., Tan, K. L., & Phuah, K. T. (2020). The impact of COVID-19 on tourism industry in Malaysia. Current issues in tourism, DOI: 10.1080/13683500.2020.1777951 Malaysian Association of Hotel (MAH). (2020). Short term economic plan but what about tourism?
- Fuchs, M. (2022). Crisis communication and corporate social responsibility: a case study on IHG Hotels & Resorts and what organizations can learn from Covid-19 (Doctoral dissertation).
- Genovese, A., Lenny Koh, S. C., Kumar, N., & Tripathi, P. K. (2014). Exploring the challenges in implementing supplier environmental performance measurement models: A case study. *Production Planning & Control*, 25(13-14), 1198-1211.
- Goldgruber, E., Sackl-Sharif, S., Ausserhofer, J., & Gutounig, R. (2018). When the levee breaks: Recommendations for social media use during environmental disasters. *Emerald Publishing Limited, Bingley*, 229-253
- Holmes, W. S. (2011). Crisis communications and social media: Advantages, disadvantages and best practices. Retrieved on 15 June 2022 from: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=ccisymposium>
- Hornmoen, H., & Måseide, P. H. (2018). Social media in management of the terror crisis in Norway: experiences and lessons learned. *Emerald Publishing Limited, Bingley*, 85-112
- Jayasekara, R. U., Jayathilaka, G. S., Siriwardana, C., Amaratunga, D., Haigh, R., Bandara, C., & Dissanayake, R. (2021). Identifying gaps in early warning mechanisms and evacuation procedures for tsunamis in Sri Lanka, with a special focus on the use of social media. *International Journal of Disaster Resilience in the Built Environment*. Vol. ahead-of-print, No. ahead-of-print.
- Joseph, C., & Taplin, R. (2012). Local government website sustainability reporting: A mimicry perspective. *Social Responsibility Journal*, 8(3), 363-372.

- Joseph, C., Nichol, E. O., & Jonathan, L. (2019). Councils' environment management system: An isomorphism inquiry. *Management of Environmental Quality: An International Journal*, 30(6), 1314-1330.
- Karim, W., Haque, A., Anis, Z., & Ulfy, M. A. (2020). The movement control order (MCO) for COVID-19 crisis and its impact on tourism and hospitality sector in Malaysia. *International Tourism and Hospitality Journal*, 3(2), 1-7.
- Kwok, L., J. Lee, & S. H. Han (2021): Crisis communication on social media: What types of COVID-19 messages get the attention? *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly*, 1, 1-16.
- Kwok, L., Mao, Z., & Huang, Y. K. (2019). Consumers' electronic word-of-mouth behavioral intentions on Facebook: Does message type have an effect? *Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 19(3), 296–307.
- Lanz, L. H., Ferrari, M., & Mody, M., (2020 March 24). Hospitality communications in a time of coronavirus: Tips for maintaining trust and engagement. *Boston Hospitality Review*. Retrieved on 15 June 2022 from:
<https://www.bu.edu/bhr/2020/03/24/hospitality-communications-in-a-time-of-coronavirus-tips-for-maintaining-trust-and-engagement/>
- Malaysian Association of Hotel (MAH). (2021, February 5). *Cry Of Despair From The Hotel Industry "Hotel Industry In Serious Need Of Immediate Rescue"* MAH. <https://www.hotels.org.my/press/34167-cry-of-despair-from-the-hotel-industry-hotel-industry-in-serious-need-of-immediate-rescue>
- Mehraliyev, F., Chan, I. C. C., Choi, Y., Koseoglu, M. A., & Law, R. (2020). A state-of-the-art review of smart tourism research. *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, 37(1), 78-91
- Meyer, J. W., & Rowan, B. (1977). Institutionalized organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 83(2), 340–363.
- Midin, M., Joseph, C., & Mohamed, N. (2017). Promoting societal governance: Stakeholders' engagement disclosure on Malaysian local authorities' websites. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 142, 1672-1683.
- Miles, M., & Huberman, A. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Omilion-Hodges, L. M., McClain, K. L. (2016). University use of social media and the crisis lifecycle: Organizational messages, first information responders' reactions, reframed messages and dissemination patterns. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 54, 630–638.

- Rafliana, I., Jalayer, F., Cerase, A., Cugliari, L., Baiguera, M., Salmanidou, D., & Hancilar, U. (2022). Tsunami risk communication and management: Contemporary gaps and challenges. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 70(1), 102771
- Richard Baldwin, B. W. (2020). *Economics in the time of Covid-19*. London, UK: CEPR Press.
- Roy, S. C., & Roy, M. (2015). Tourism in Bangladesh: Present status and future prospects. *International Journal of Management Science and Business Administration*, 1(8), 53-61.
- Santhosh, L., Rojas, J., C., & Lyons, P/, G. (2020). Zooming into focus groups: Strategies for qualitative research in the era of social distancing. *ATS Scholar*, 2(2), 1769–1184.
- Soboleva, A., Burton, S., Mallik, G., & Khan, A. (2017). Retweet for a Chance to...: An analysis of what triggers consumers to engage in seeded eWOM on Twitter. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 33(13-14), 1120-1148.
- Splendiani, S., & Capriello, A. (2022). Crisis communication, social media and natural disasters—the use of Twitter by local governments during the 2016 Italian earthquake. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 27(3), 509-526.
- Susilo, M. E., & Prayudi, P. (2021). Crisis communication during the Covid-19 pandemic. *RSF Conference Series: Business, Management and Social Sciences*, 1(4), 98-103.
- United Nations World Tourism Organization (n.d.), *Impact Assessment of the Covid-19 outbreak on international tourism*. <https://www.unwto.org/impact-assessment-of-the-covid-19-outbreak-on-international-tourism>
- Tz, S., Schultz, F., & Glocka, S. (2013). Crisis communication online: How medium, crisis type and emotions affected public reactions in the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster. *Public Relations Review*, 39, 40-46.
- World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) (2022, June 22) *Economic Impact Reports*. WTTC. <https://wttc.org/Research/Economic-Impact>
- Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case study research: Design and methods*. (3rd ed.). Sage Publication, Inc., Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Zavistic, Z., Zavistic, S., & Bernardic, D. (2022). Social media as crisis communication platform in hotel industry. In *Economic and Social Development (Book of Proceedings)*, 77th International Scientific Conference on Economic and Social, 95-107.

APPENDIX

Interview Questions

1. What is your definition of crisis communication in the context of the hotel industry especially during and after the post-COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What is your opinion of the following statement?
The hotels should ensure the maximum usage of their websites to disclose as much information to their community to improve the level of transparency and accountability. Do you agree or disagree and why?
3. Who was involved in the decision-making related to the crisis communication and management agenda in your organization?
What are the strategies involved in crisis management in your organization?
4. What impact, if any, do crisis communication and management requirements have on the day-to-day operation of your organization?
5. What are the reasons for disclosing or not disclosing crisis management information on the website?
6. To what extent do the factors such as the hotels' resources, support from top management, and others influence the crisis management and communication on your organization's website?
7. Does your organization refer to other websites for the communication of crisis management information? If yes, which organization?
8. What are the activities or processes involved in crisis management and communication on the website?